# Crafting an Interactive Novel: MOSAIC and Using Twine for Narratives

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## Introduction

We consume so many kinds of stories. Some in novels, others in movies and TV, but videogames and interactive novels are usually not discussed when thinking about good stories. We might think that people play games solely because they are fun, and while that may be partly true, games also offer enriching narratives that rival some of the greatest books of all time. Interactive media is special because it allows the player to have an active role in constructing the story. Their choices make an impact, and MOSAIC was created for readers to experience a story where choices lead to different outcomes.

This past summer, I created an interactive novel about overcoming internal obstacles and finding one's true passion. Jamie is young and growing as a poet, and Boston is one of the best places to do it. But it's not always easy. When Jamie begins to struggle with writing, reality hits: money is tight, success feels impossible, and deciding whether poetry is worth all the trouble becomes the life-defining question. Jump into Jamie's shoes and make the tough choices. Grow as a poet and help Jamie's climb out of despair. If nothing else, just see how Jamie's next four days play out, especially when the poet comes across a few strangers and a lost love. Friends, exploration, and identity are only a few pieces of Jamie's mosaic, but you'll decide how it all fits together.

## Goals

- Construct a narrative from the ground up, working on self-imposed deadlines with strict short-term goals every week.
- Develop a complex, well-thought-out narrative. Plan out setting, characters, plot, and fulfilling story decisions.
- Learn software skills to create a digital narrative, using the storyboarding software Twine.
- Incorporate images and designs that fit an overarching theme of MOSAIC, ensuring players are visually engaged through color and picture.
- Attend the Game Developers Conference to learn and acquire narrative skills that are specific to video games and interactive media.
- In tandem with the novel, conduct a research study on customization options in games and player emotion.

## Summer Timetable

This project was a 13-week endeavor. The following is the timetable sketched out before starting the work, including both the interactive fiction and research study.

**Week 1** (May 17-21) Research & Premise| Research Question & Lit Review
**Week 2** (May 24-28) Outline| Study Design and Hypothesis
**Week 3** (May 31 – Jun 4) Writing| Draft of Study Survey
**Week 4** (Jun 7 – Jun 11) Writing | Detailed Methods Section
**Week 5** (Jun 14 – Jun 18) Writing | Publish Study Survey
**Week 6** (Jun 21 – Jun 25) Writing | Revised Introduction Section
**Week 7** (Jun 28 – Jul 2) Writing | Draft Results Section
**Week 8** (Jul 5 – Jul 9) Writing | Draft Discussion Section
**Week 9** (Jul 12 – Jul 16) Revisions and Formatting | Revised Results and Discussion
**Week 10** (Jul 19 – Jul 23) Game Developer's Conference
**Week 11** (Jul 26 – Jul 30) Revisions and Formatting |Revise Research Paper
**Week 12** (Aug 2 – Aug 6) Read, Review, and Presentation work
**Week 13** (Aug 9 – Aug 13) Read, Review, and Presentation work

## Building Boston

The story is set in Fenmore-Kenway, a neighborhood in Boston. This required extensive research into the area, looking at information on its history, notable landmarks, and everyday shopping areas. I gathered images of different locations to plan my story around, making sure to create a story that could only happen in Boston. Jamie travels to several different places in the story, so it was important to create distinct settings that felt real and comparable to the actual Fenmore-Kenway area.



## Creating The Story

I planned the story to span over 4 main story arcs, intro, and ending. Each story arc would introduce a new character for Jamie to interact with, a new setting to observe, and new twists and reveals for the player to enjoy. This required keeping consistent story documents to refer to so that the story was complex and coherent.

I used an outline to briefly plan prominent story beats I wanted to include in my narrative, leaving enough room between beats to stay creative and free to change my mind as I wrote. Twine helped me create branching paths consistent with the players' choices, which made the story complex and unique for every player.

The story contains over 80,000 words, nearly 1,000 links, and three definitive endings. It was critical to keep the story organized, and Twine allowed for visual passage boxes and links that could be spaced out and easy to follow.
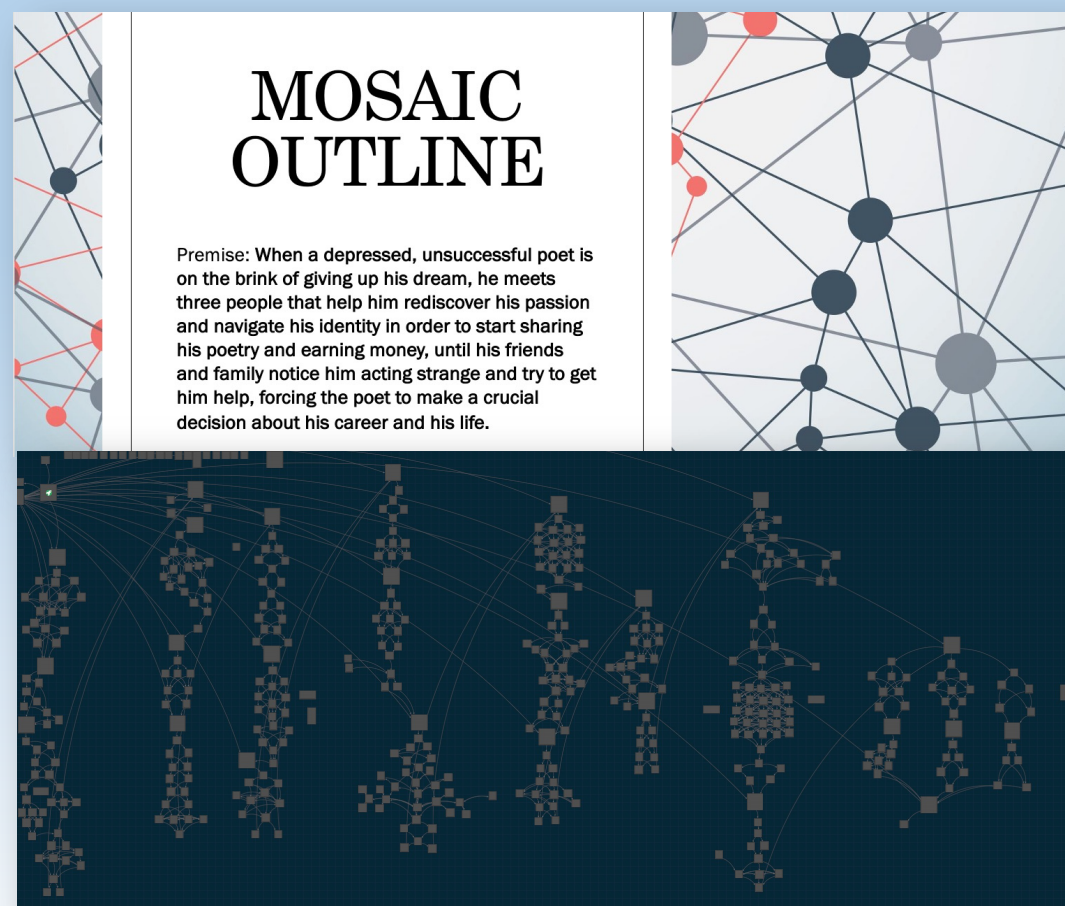


## Planning Characters

Characters are how the player relates to a story, so they need to feel real and believable. The human characters I planned out all have unique traits, characteristics, histories, and goals. Throughout the story, the reader gets a glimpse of these characters, like in most other novels. Even if I don't explain Jamie's entire history to the reader, it is still important for me as an author to know and understand it. That is why I created several interview questions for each of my characters, figuring out how I think they would answer them. This gave me a better sense of characters like Jamie and Mehri, and it helped me craft dialogue and behaviors that were consistent with their personality.

Although there is no visual representation of these characters, it helped to have a physical image in mind when creating them. I used a character creator tool from charactercreator.org to get a sense of what my characters could look like and how they'd fit into the real world.
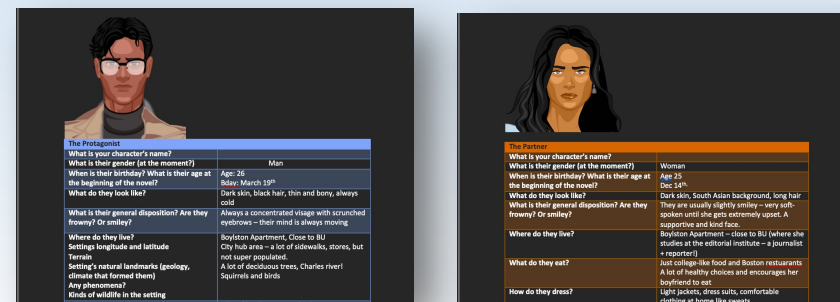


## Designing in Twine

Twine offers several interactive tools and customization options that I took advantage of after writing the first draft of MOSAIC. For example, I included mouseover interactivity, where the player can reveal Jamie's random, internal thoughts while continuing with the story.

To keep the reader engaged, I also made passages short and hidden until the player clicks on the screen. This prevents text intimidation on the computer and allows the reader to go at their own pace. Links that attached one passage to another were turned into colored buttons, so they were distinct from the rest of the text.

I used a myriad of colors in MOSAIC, combining different colors to create unique gradients for different characters and settings. This required consistency and organization so that every color and design looked intentional and noticeable by the reader.
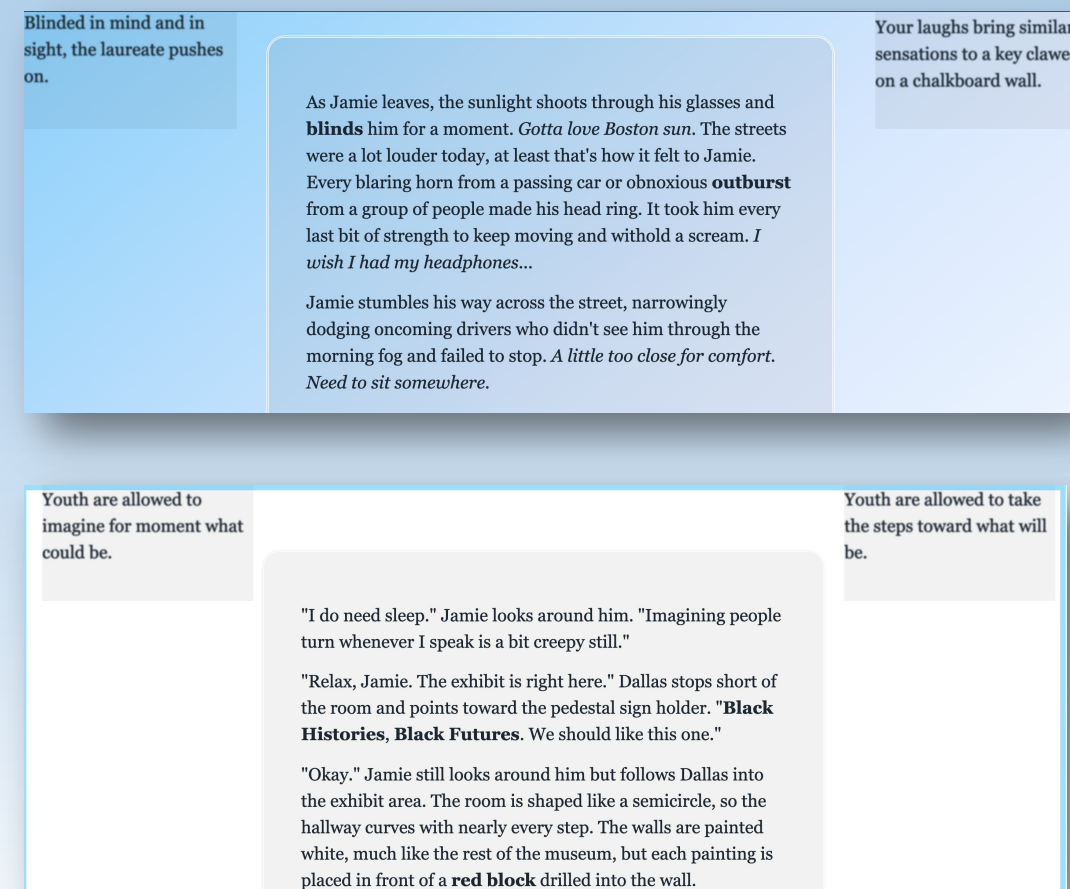


## Reflection

Creating MOSAIC was a new and enriching experience. Building a world takes time and creating characters to walk through that world takes even longer. In most writing classes, I'm not afforded months to spend working on a large-scale project, so this summer felt special and rewarding.

I used my writing skills to create an interactive fiction, and I was only able to do that through the funding I received from OUSF at Duke. I was able to pursue my passions for storytelling and research, and I created something I am proud to have my name on.

MOSAIC is a journey. While I have released a beta version on itch.io, I plan to continue to work on this fiction. I want to revise my story further with the help of industry professionals and use more visuals and audio to create a more immersive experience for all. I know there is more to come beyond MOSAIC. I will continue to write and create, sometimes on my own and other times with a team of creative and talented individuals. No matter what path it take, I'm confident that I'll be creating and telling stories for others.

Just like Jamie, we're always looking for ways to get better and improve. Attending the virtual Game Developers Conference was an eye-opening experience, and I met inspiring people who share the love of game narration as much as me, and I can't wait to find my footing as narrative writer and designer.